

Debating defence: Time for a paradigm shift?

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The Howard government's decision to consult the general public about the future development of Australia's defence policy is novel and welcome. Such an initiative seems in keeping with the best traditions of open and accountable government. Yet given that John Howard has already flagged that defence spending will rise whatever the outcome of the consultative process, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the whole exercise is a calculated attempt to exploit the good-will engendered by the successful Timor intervention, and secure public endorsement of policies that are already pencilled in.

Nevertheless, the publication of the government's Green Paper, *Defence Review 2000*, does represent an opportunity to review the prevailing wisdom. Given the way that 'expert' discourses tend to marginalise alternative positions within the policymaking process,¹ this is unlikely to deflect policymakers from their seemingly pre-determined course, but defence is such a conspicuous consumer of limited national resources that it's important to at least question some of the assumptions that inform the normally closed world of strategic planning.

The first point to make, and the most crucial element of Australia's strategic position, is that Australia is one of the most – perhaps, *the* most – secure place on the planet, at least when judged by a conventional strategic calculus. Even the Green Paper concedes that it 'cannot readily foresee the circumstances under which an attack might occur or where it might come from'.² It is not necessary to be a student of Clausewitz or steeped in the mysteries of military logic to recognise that, as an island continent, Australia presents a formidable, even an insurmountable challenge, to a would-be adversary. The only country with the capacity to invade Australia now or in the foreseeable future, as *Defence Review 2000* makes clear, is the United States.

Given that the US has been the apparently unshakeable foundation of Australia's security since the Second World War, the prospect of an American invasion can presumably be discounted. Clearly, the very idea is unthinkable. But is the United States unique in this regard? Other countries that might be thought to harbour aggressive intentions toward Australia – and which are presumably the justification for and target of our strategic readiness – seem equally unlikely threats.

Indonesia, for example, plainly lacks the capacity to maintain control within its borders, let alone ours. China – another of the usual suspects – is not only an intimidatingly long way away, but even if strategists could conjure up a scenario in which it actually made sense to try and mount an invasion of Australia, the US would presumably not view such an event with complete equanimity. Indeed, it is safe to assume that the US will continue to make judgements about military intervention based on its own perceived strategic interests – with or without a formal alliance with Australia.

This matters because one of the justifications for maintaining a close alliance relationship with the US, hosting key intelligence gathering and disseminating facilities, to say nothing of fighting several wars, has been that this somehow guarantees American support if Australia is threatened. Not only is it difficult to envisage the circumstance in which such an insurance policy might be cashed in, but even if it were, its redemption is unlikely to be determined solely by Australia's earlier investments in the relationship. In the meantime, though, as even conservative commentators have pointed out,³ Australia finds itself enmeshed in a destabilising, unproven defence system that is principally designed to protect America, and which may make Australia's relations with the region even more problematic than they already are.⁴

Whatever the strategic merits of the US alliance may be, it has an added symbolic importance in the current debate. The relationship with the US, like the whole seemingly pre-empted question of defence spending more generally, is illustrative of the way some elements of Australia's defence policy are simply non negotiable. Despite the invitation to debate, some policies are clearly sacrosanct, enjoy bilateral support, and unlikely to be affected by the current review. Yet while there may still be an argument for Australia retaining some modest military capacity to deal with illegal immigrants and fishers, terrorists or the like, there seems less and less justification for maintaining more substantial forces. There are a number of compelling forces at work in the contemporary international system that justify this assertion, and a number of key consequences that flow from them.

The new international order

The world no longer works in the way it once did. Some of the supposedly 'timeless' assumptions about states and their behaviour are becoming increasingly untenable. One of the most important trends of recent time, especially since the end of the Cold War, has been a general shift from 'geo-politics' to 'geo-economics'.⁵ Economic development has become a more critical determinant of national power and welfare, and consequently a more important focus of policy attention. Underpinning this shift has been a more fundamental transformation in the underpinning logic and potential efficacy of military expansion and conquest. Before the Second World War, for example, it may actually have made some sort of sense – from the perspective of Japan's militarily dominated government, at least – to invade Southeast Asia and secure access to vital resources threatened by the US's containment policies. These days, however, Japan is a classic example of a new sort of state, one that uses corporate power and foreign investment to gain control over the very same resources it once attempted to secure through military means.⁶

There has been a secular transformation in the underlying logic of the global political economy which the Green Paper acknowledges, but to which it gives scant consideration. Simply put, within the democratically ordered, industrialised world, economic power and development have become far more important to states than have conventional security issues.⁷ Indeed, the very definition of security now has a crucial economic and even

environmental dimension that is transforming the way security issues are conceived and the way inter-state relations are conducted as a consequence.⁸

The European Union is the most advanced expression of this logic. As a consequence of greater political and economic interaction, it is now quite simply unthinkable that the countries of western Europe could go to war with each other. Long-standing foes like Germany and France are in fact the backbone and drivers of a continuing process of integration that makes issues of national defence and sovereignty increasingly anachronistic.

The key point here is that it no longer makes sense in the way it once did to expect any benefits to accrue from the forcible invasion of another developed and wealthy territory. Not only would valuable and complex infrastructure on both sides of any conflict be destroyed, but even any physical assets which survived this process are less valuable than they once were. In an era of the so-called knowledge economy,⁹ a would-be conqueror must firstly stop the most skilled and wealth-generating elements of the population fleeing, and then bend them to his - surely women are too wise for this - will.

In short, the much invoked forces of 'globalisation' in general and economic integration in particular seem to be making warfare, within the rich world, at least, increasingly unlikely. Oddly, policy makers have been slow to pick up on or exploit this potentially positive aspect to the increasingly resisted and reviled idea of globalisation. But if the pervasive logic of liberal capitalism is followed to its logical conclusion, there are powerful reasons to suppose that it might help legitimate globalisation while shoring up the embattled state's fiscal position.

Extending the logic of neoliberalism

Within the Anglo-American economies, the last few decades have been marked by a sustained attempt to institutionalise market mechanisms in every sphere of economic and social activity. In Australia, governments of both political persuasions have placed neoliberal, market-centred initiatives and ideas at the centre of public policy¹⁰ - with the noteworthy and glaring exception of national defence. And yet if governments take the underlying logic and dynamic of market-centred liberalism seriously, and abide by the concomitant imperative to reduce government involvement in the provision of public services and goods wherever possible, a more radical, but philosophically consistent solution to Australia's security dilemma and the increasingly unaffordable expenditure it entails presents itself: defence, too, could be outsourced.

At a time when conventional military threats have become unimaginable, the justification for each nation maintaining a significant and ruinously expensive capacity to deal with a threat that will almost certainly never arise is increasingly difficult to justify. In this context the much derided - by Australia and the US, at least - New Zealand model, which is based on reduced expenditure and the development of a more 'appropriate' military force, is an example Australia could well copy rather than castigate. It is not at all obvious that New Zealand is a less secure place now than it was when a more integral

part of the ANZUS alliance and more heavily reliant on the US for its security. On the other hand, New Zealand's ability to conduct an independent foreign policy, and establish closer and more effective international and regional relations, has been enhanced.¹¹

Yet handing responsibility for national defence to the private sector is an unrealistic and unsettling prospect. Whether it is any wiser to entrench a single country at the apex of an international security system and then hope that its interests will coincide with Australia's is equally problematic. For all its well-known problems and difficulties,¹² a more enduring solution might be to make the United Nations responsible for guaranteeing international and national security.

Unrealisable and Utopian as such an idea might seem at present, making the UN responsible for international security has a number of key potential advantages. First and most importantly, individual states would have a greatly reduced necessity for individual defence spending, promoting a virtuous circle which further reduces existing 'security dilemmas'. Indeed, a really creative response to making the UN a more financially secure and independent body capable of such a role, might be to raise some of the funds through a tax on international capital movements,¹³ thus helping to stabilise the fragile internal financial system as well.

If the UN did have an independent military capacity with which to pursue peace-keeping, and if necessary peace-making activities, it would also have the great benefit of de-politicising the sorts of operations Australia recently undertook in Timor. In the longer term a UN military capacity in which members had confidence might even help to wind back the seemingly inexorable spread of nuclear weapons. Surely, these are desirable goals if achievable.

Concluding remarks

Are such ideas, however, simply the unrealistic pipe-dreams of the strategically illiterate? Perhaps. But who would have thought that the nations of Western Europe would seriously contemplate developing a collective army?¹⁴ Who would have believed that so many countries would come to have completely undefended and 'open' borders? Indeed, who would have imagined that the bi-polar order that characterised the Cold War for more than 50 years would be swept away in a moment? Certainly not the generations of strategic 'experts' who advised governments where to spend public money.

If the Howard government's 'debate' is to amount more than an arcane discussion about the relative technical merits of expensive military hardware, then alternative ideas need to be, if not taken seriously, then at least more convincingly repudiated. The onus should be on those who wish to spend money on warfare rather than welfare to defend such priorities and to precisely identify the threats that justify them. Given Australia's woeful performance in what seem to be increasingly important knowledge-related activities,¹⁵ we need to collectively ask whether we can afford to spend some \$13 billion a year on a potential threat that even the government's own experts concede they cannot identify.

Australia's unique natural advantages and the increasingly remote prospect of a direct military threat to this country, mean that Australia could exploit its benign strategic environment. Not only might significantly decreased military expenditure produce immediate returns in terms of the budget bottom line and potentially better regional relations, but it might also serve as a powerful exemplar of the benefits that accrue from a less militaristic 'posture'. After all, if Australia cannot take advantage of the new international order and break free of the old paradigm, who can?

Endnotes

¹ Haas, Ernst B. (1990) *When Knowledge is Power: Three Models of International Organization*, (Berkeley: University of California Press).

² Department of Defence (2000) *Defence Review 2000 – Our Future Defence Force*, (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service), p 18.

³ Fraser, Malcolm (2000) 'US missile shield a call to nuclear arms', *The Australian*, July 18, p 13.

⁴ Beeson, Mark (2000) 'Australia: Out of Asia?', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 8, p 38.

⁵ Luttwak, E.N. (1990) 'From geopolitics to geo-economics', *The National Interest*, Summer, pp 17-23.

⁶ Rosecrance, Richard (1986) *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World*, (New York: Basic Books).

⁷ Reinforcing this change in perceptions is one of the few empirically robust contentions in political science: democratic states don't go to war with each other, something that has the potential to radically alter the strategic calculations and operating environments of the increasingly numerous democracies. See Russett, Bruce (1993) *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

⁸ Buzan, B. Waever, O & Wilde, J (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner).

⁹ Drucker, Peter (1993) *Post-Capitalist Society*, (New York: Harper Business).

¹⁰ Beeson, Mark and Firth, Ann (1998) 'Neoliberalism as a political rationality: Australian public policy since the 1980s', *Journal of Sociology*, 34 (3), pp 215-31.

¹¹ Thakur, Ramesh and Maley, Wiliam (2000) 'How New Zealand overshadows Australia, its larger neighbor', *International Herald Tribune*, on line version, April 29.

¹² Falk, Richard (1999) *Predatory Globalization: A Critique*, (Cambridge: polity Press).

¹³ An increasing number of commentators, including orthodox economists, now argue the merits of such a tax. Less attention has been given to what might be done with the revenue. See, Felix, D (1995) 'The Tobin tax proposal: Background, issues and prospects', *Futures*, 27 (2):195-208.

¹⁴ Medley, R (1999) 'Europe's next big idea', *Foreign Affairs*, 78 (5), pp 18-22.

¹⁵ Goldsworthy, Ashley (1997) *The Global Information Economy: The Way Ahead*, (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia).

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